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SUBJECT: MOLDOVA 2009 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
SCENESETTER

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REFS: A. 08 Chisinau 1257 B. 08 Chisinau 1276

11. (SBU) Summary: With the April 5 at-large parliamentary elections rapidly approaching, the electoral campaign is at its final stage. The most recent poll shows a relatively high 26.4 percent of voters as still undecided, and likely to make up their minds in the very last days. At this point it is still unclear whether the Party of Communists (PCRM) will overcome its steady slide in popularity since 2001 to win enough votes to put together the ruling coalition or whether the opposition parties could overcome historical animosities to form a coalition of the 61 parliamentary votes (out of 101) needed to elect the president. An increasingly real possibility is a third outcome: that neither side gets a clear majority and that the new parliament remains deadlocked and unable to choose a consensus president. If two attempts to choose a president fail, the law requires a second round of nationwide parliamentary elections. Post is completing its campaign monitoring visits to all 32 raions (districts) in the country (to be reported septel) and will field teams of observers on election day. End summary.

PCRM Steadily Losing Support

12. (SBU) From its high point in the 2001 parliamentary elections, when it gained 49.9 percent of the vote (and 71 seats in Parliament), the PCRM has suffered a steady decline: in the 2005 parliamentary elections, it received 45.9 percent (and 56 seats). The trend in local council and mayoral elections was similar. In the 2003 mayoral elections, the PCRM won 41 percent of the mayoralties, dropping to 37.3 percent in 2007; it won 48.1 percent of the votes for raion and municipal councils in 2003, dropping to 34.2 percent in 2007; and in the 2003 town and village council elections, the PCRM won 44.9 percent of votes, dropping to 32.7 percent in 2007.

13. (SBU) The PCRM has continued to suffer from declining popularity throughout the country. Most polls put the PCRM somewhere in the 30 percent range, representing solid support (i.e., respondents express few or no second-party preferences) from mostly older and rural voters. It is expected that the PCRM will be the largest

single party in the parliament, but that it will not muster enough votes to put together a majority without the support of MPs from other parties.

Legal (but Suspect) Means to Gain Advantage May Backfire

¶4. (SBU) Moldovan law prohibits changes to the electoral code within six months of the elections. In January 2008, in the run-up to the elections, the GOM made several changes to the electoral code which, though legal, appeared designed to give an advantage to the PCRM. One change to the electoral code raised the threshold for parliamentary representation from 4 to 6 percent of votes, in an attempt to exclude smaller parties. The higher threshold will result in more "wasted" votes for smaller parties. The votes for parties that do not receive at least 6 percent of votes will be redistributed to the parties which cleared the threshold. The PCRM would, at its present poll strength, receive the plurality share of the redistributed votes. The new code also banned electoral coalitions during the election campaign. The ban on coalitions divides and theoretically weakens the opposition. The changes to the code also disallowed Moldovans with dual nationality from holding elected office.

¶5. (SBU) However, these moves may backfire on the PCRM: the threshold will likely eliminate several

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smaller parties that might have been willing to trade their small number of votes in Parliament for a minor cabinet position. The PCRM may find itself isolated without smaller parties willing to form a coalition, and consequently denied the possibility of a majority. In addition, the three major opposition parties have already declared that they would not vote with the PCRM in the new Parliament to elect the President.

Some Charges of Abuse; Some Problems Resolved

¶6. (SBU) During the campaign, some opposition party leaders said that police intimidated voters with drawn-out checks of their businesses and threats of possible job loss. Some public workers (school directors, hospital directors, civil servants) reportedly were told that they had to attend PCRM campaign meetings. The government also opened or reopened cases against some opposition leaders in advance of the electoral season. We have heard consistent reports of misuse of administrative resources, e.g., official cars and cell phones used for campaign purposes. We note that these charges have also been levied against other parties, in raions where other parties govern at the local level. A Moldovan NGO, which systematically monitored the pre-campaign and campaign seasons, reported police intimidation of one of its staff during an attempt to investigate the violent disruption of campaign meetings. Media not affiliated with the ruling party claimed intimidation by governmental representatives (e.g., a police officer twisting a reporter's arm during an interview and local police seizing computers in a warrantless search of a TV station). In reaction to the ProTV case (ref A), government decided to postpone any action on the licensing of broadcasters until after the elections.

¶17. (SBU) In December there were reports that the Ministry of Justice was creating roadblocks for the re-registration of political parties. On January 30, all 28 parties who sought registration received it. During the electoral campaign, parties held political demonstrations. (See ref B for an account of an opposition rally that went ahead despite police attempts to block it. See ref A for an account of GOM threats to de-license an independent TV station, and the government's decision to defer action until "later," under international pressure.) Reports of police stopping buses of opposition supporters heading to rallies in Chisinau noted drawn-out document checks, and participants being late for the demonstration.

¶18. (SBU) The Central Election Commission (CEC) established and administered the rules for campaigning and voting, regularly cooperating with international organizations and NGOs. Donors noted a high level of transparency in CEC administration of campaign-related activity. The CEC initially resisted Embassy requests to register U.S. Embassy Kyiv officials and some embassy-affiliated people as election monitors. The CEC eventually accredited all our volunteers. On the down side, after allowing NDI to register short-term observers, the CEC refused the same request from IRI.

It's About Personalities not Ideologies

¶19. (SBU) There is not a great deal of difference between the parties in terms of their platform. Despite its "Communist" name, all parties, including the PCRM, support a market economy and promote European integration as a goal. The liberal parties (the Liberal Democratic Party, PLDM, and the Liberal Party, PL) take a more free-market stance and favor closer ties with Romania. Note that they do not support unification; that idea died as a viable platform over a decade ago. The PL and PLDM tilt in favor of NATO membership, while the PCRM maintains support for the

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neutrality clause in the Constitution. However, most voters have almost no interest in these policies and continue to identify parties by the names of their leaders. For many voters the primary concern is solving the economic problems that have driven almost a quarter of the population out of the country. The party that makes the most believable pitch to improve the economy is the one that will receive their votes.

Predictions--and the Best Outlook for the PCRM

¶10. (SBU) Given historical trends, poll results, analyses from contacts, and our own educated guesses, we are predicting that fairly counted election results would yield about 30-35 percent for the PCRM; 10-20 percent for the AMN (Our Moldova Alliance), and a maximum of 10-15 percent each for the PL and PLDM. These scenarios assume that only the PCRM, AMN, PL, and PLDM get past the six percent threshold. Though some observers still consider it possible that Dumitru Diacov's Democratic Party (PD) or Vasile Tarlev's UCM (Centrist Union of Moldova) might cross the threshold, the chances seem marginal.

¶11. (SBU) In a projected scenario representing the most favorable outcome for the PCRM (35 percent, and an AMN/PL/PLDM aggregate of an equal 35 percent), the PCRM would receive half of the remaining 30 percent "wasted" votes, or 15 percent, giving it a total of 50 percent of the vote, and the AMN/PL/PLDM aggregate the same, leaving both sides in deadlock well short of the three-fifths vote needed to elect a President. In a second parliamentary election, both sides would need the support of smaller parties that did not make it over the threshold. In the past, the PCRM has shown itself adept at winning over individual opposition members in Parliament, in the raions, and even in the Chisinau Municipal Council in sufficient numbers, and by perfectly legal quid-pro-quo offers, to enhance its numbers.

The Real Politics Begin after the Elections

¶12. (SBU) Election day represents a process of dealing the cards to each party. Once the results are counted, the PCRM, AMN, PL, PLDM and other parties will each evaluate their positions and calculate the strength of their hand. That's when the real political game begins. On the opposition side, several very stubborn, strong-willed men will begin the search for the right formula to divide the spoils. If one party most likely the AMN did significantly better than the other two, then its leader, Serafim Urechean, would have the best argument to be the coalition candidate for President. It is at the cabinet level that we could expect some drawn-out and complicated wrangling for positions.

¶13. (SBU) If the April 5 voting gives no clear majority in Parliament, as we expect, then it is highly doubtful that any candidate will receive the required 61 votes in the first round of parliamentary voting for president. In such a case a second parliamentary runoff round would be held within three days between the two top candidates. If a factionalized Parliament again failed to elect a president, then parliamentarians would have a final, third try, which must be organized within 15 days. If this last try also fails to elect a President, then the Acting President must dissolve the newly elected Parliament and set a date for new parliamentary elections. During such a political crisis, President Voronin would continue on as Acting President with the same cabinet in place, until a new parliament succeeded in electing a president. Such a situation took place in 2000 when the Parliament had to elect the president, failed, and was dissolved. "Early" elections were announced and resulted in a new parliament and the election of President Voronin in 2001.

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Comment

¶14. (SBU) As we have noted, predictions are still impossible at this point. For election junkies who want to see how things turn out as they turn out, Post recommends that they log on to www.cec.md or www.voteaza.md, starting around 11:00 P.M. local (4:00 P.M. EST) on April 5, and watch the results as they are posted in real time.

CHAUDHRY